

Remote Facilitation

Online Small Groups

Thank you for your willingness to help lead your group during this time of pandemic and isolation. During this time of physical distancing, small group faith sharing is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Many people are feeling lonely and isolated with a dramatic reduction of in-person interactions. It is more important than ever to connect, and technology can help us to hold each other in community and be an important way to provide pastoral care.

However, many of us are new to connecting in this way, so hosting virtual meetings can be intimidating. They also come with their own unique challenges.

You Can Do This!

As a church leader, technology may not be your “thing.” That’s okay. You do not have to be the one to figure out the technical details. Your job is to make the invitations and connections.

Members of your parish have had to figure out how to use online video conferencing for connecting with family members, work responsibilities, their child’s school, or other reasons. It is very likely that at least one member of any small group you would form will be able to take on the technology piece for you.

If you do not already have the technology expertise personally or within your staff, we suggest that you set that aside and begin by making small group invitations. Once you have willing participants, begin by asking if any of them is willing and able to host the meetings. Otherwise, ask your broader community for help.

Video Conferencing Platforms

There are a number of free or low-cost tools for video conferencing. A member of the group most likely can host all other members for free, without you having to be involved.

If you are seeking out a platform yourself, there are many online articles that can help you. Simply do a web search for “best free video conferencing.” Zoom (<http://zoom.us>) is one of the most popular options for hosting meetings and has a free tier.

Tips for Facilitation by Video

It will be important to think through how the meetings will be facilitated remotely. Here are some recommendations.

- **Group size.** Generally, we would suggest aiming for a group size of up to about eight participants. If you have much more than this number interested, simply form additional groups.
- **Scheduling.** Small faith sharing groups typically meet once a week. It may make sense for groups sharing in this particular experience to meet more frequently: twice a week or even more often. Ask the participants what they would prefer.
- **Facilitator.** A parish staff member does not have to be a part of each group (although it could be very helpful to them and insightful to the leader). It would be important to have a meeting facilitator who can be especially welcoming, coordinate, and step in as needed.
- **Tech facilitator.** It may be helpful to have a separate technology facilitator who can help folks if they run into trouble. Share the phone number of this person before the meeting so they can call if they have trouble joining, turning on their microphone, etc.

- **The value of video.** Not all participants may have a camera or be willing to use it. That is certainly not required, although it can help the group feel more connected and provide visual cues.
- **Getting voices into the circle.** This small group process uses a “round table” methodology, in which the written material is read out loud by the participants during the meeting, one paragraph at a time. We have learned that this process brings all of the voices into the circle early on and makes participants more comfortable to share later on. This is even more important when we are meeting through screens.
- **One voice at a time.** Think a bit beforehand about how you can help the group from talking over each other. If the group is small enough and there is little audio delay, you may not have to do anything. However, if it becomes a problem, one leader could be responsible for calling on speakers one at a time. Participants could raise their hands (if on video) or type in a chat box if they would like to speak.

Before the Sessions

- **Distribute the handouts.** We recommend that you send the small group handouts to your participants well beforehand by email or postal mail. Some participants may not have a way to print out the materials from their computer, and it may be difficult for them to read off their screen if it is filled with the video conferencing app. One other option could be to have the facilitator screen share, showing the talking points to all.
- **Review the standard guidelines.** Be sure to also cover the guidelines found on the next page.

After the Sessions

- **Next steps.** Once the group has covered the material in this process, check in to see if they have interest in continuing to meet. Extra meetings could be unstructured, or you could use one of our many other downloadable small group series at <https://pastoral.center/small-group-eresources>. In particular, consider *Grandparenting with Grace* or even the retreat for senior adults *The Best Is Yet to Be*.

Facilitating the Sessions

The simple format of the sessions allows them to be led without the help of a staff person. However, it would be helpful to have one or more volunteer facilitators who welcome participants, track the time, and help ensure that everyone has a chance to share.

Here are some tips for leading the group:

- ① **Be welcoming and hospitable.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or new to participating in your parish/faith formation events. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome. If you go first, you might model a short introduction such name, age (group is for elders!), whether you live with family or in a retirement center.
- ② **Review the group conversation guidelines** (see below) at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Make sure everyone feels comfortable in the group.
- ③ **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role for helping everyone feel included.
- ④ **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to begin the discussion. You can prompt people, but we recommend that you try something called the “popcorn” method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity. Don’t ever put people on the spot by compelling them to share. Let people know that, at times, it’s absolutely fine to listen attentively and not feel they need to respond.
- ⑤ **Listen to feedback** from the group along the way. Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.
- ⑥ **Encourage the group to read the content aloud** rather than silently. An excellent way to get everyone's voices heard early on is to use the “round table” format. Simply have each participant read one paragraph. This paves the way for sharing: often once people have broken the ice and spoken in the circle, it’s easier for them to further participate. If someone does not wish to read, the next person goes ahead.

Small Group Guidelines

Ground Rules

Here are some guidelines for your gatherings. Your group leader will help facilitate.

1. **Confidentiality.** What's said in the group stays in group, unless you have the permission of the person who spoke it.
2. **Start on time—and end on time.** Your group leader will try to pace the sessions, but everyone can help by arriving promptly and being attentive to time.
3. **Conversation involves everyone.** Make it possible for everyone – even those who are naturally more quiet – to take part. Invite the extroverts, who are comfortable speaking most thoughts, to hold back from sharing a second time until everyone has been heard. At the same time, don't pressure anyone to share. There may be times when people just prefer to listen.
4. **Respect each other.** All perspectives are worthwhile. Avoid dismissing, making fun of, or judging anyone's thoughts and experiences. Share from your own life experience and speak for yourself. Don't problem-solve for another person or tell them what to do. Certainly share what you have found helpful, but without the assumption that everyone has to follow your approach.
5. **It's OK to agree to disagree.** It's human nature to have different opinions. (Best to stay away from politics!) There's no requirement that everyone agree. Respect everyone's opinions and experiences. Even though we share a common destination as the People of God, each person is on a unique journey.
6. **Turn off mobile phones** before the group begins! Put your electronic lives on hold for this short time to be fully present to others.

There is a magic about group process. Participants are offered an opportunity to talk about topics that may not be open to discussion anywhere else. People often ask us how we are, but we find few occasions to speak what's in our heart in a trusting environment.

Leader Guidelines

Thank you for being willing to help lead your group and make this a great experience for everyone!

Here are some things to keep in mind as you do so:

1. **Ensure good hospitality.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or the larger community. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome.
2. **Go over the ground rules** at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Some of the material is challenging, since it explores how the Gospel challenges us to change our lives. Make sure that the ground rules are followed so everyone feels comfortable in the group.
3. **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role that helps the whole group. You can apologize in advance for such interruptions when reviewing the ground rules with the group. However, don't put people on the spot by compelling them to share.
4. **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to initiate. You can rotate around the circle, but we recommend that you try something called the "popcorn" method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity.
5. **Listen to the feedback from the group along the way.** Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.

Aging Gracefully during the Pandemic

Session 1: Fear and Trust

Opening Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred, let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand
To be loved, as to love

For it is in giving that we receive
And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life
Amen.

Nothing to Fear Except Fear Itself

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time out loud, continuing around the circle.

- One of my earliest memories was a phone call announcing to my family that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. It was Dec. 7th, 1941. The news that we were suddenly at war shocked us. We were anxious and afraid, not knowing what was ahead. We gathered around the radio to hear Franklin Delano Roosevelt tell the nation that we were at war with Japan and Germany, hearing: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
- Eventually, I came to understand what he meant. FDR was concerned that our people would not only be afraid, but actually be so locked in fear that we would not have the courage to face the horrors of war. We now had to face our fears with strength and the determination to fight this war on two fronts.
- In recent years, we have become enveloped in new fears. Our children are not safe in schools and have to endure practice drills in case of gun violence. The horrors of 9/11 brought us to our knees. We have been living in a culture of fear and this has sometimes alienated us from those who are different from us.
- **Our newest fear.** A few months ago we did not know about the coronavirus. Suddenly, it was moving throughout the world. As elders, we were informed that we were the most vulnerable, especially those in nursing homes. We were told to "shelter in place," avoid crowds, wear masks, wash our hands often, and not touch our faces.
- In our wildest imaginings, we never expected to observe Pope Francis extending his blessing to the world or praying the Stations of the Cross in an empty Vatican Square. Streets appear uninhabited throughout the world. Ambulances rush to over-filled and makeshift hospitals. Nurses and doctors are exhausted and getting sick themselves. Mass burials replace funerals. Our churches are empty. Parks and beaches are closed. It is all very frightening.

- **We are called to become beacons.** As elders, we have the experience, toughness, and wisdom to demonstrate coping skills during this unprecedented time. Some of us have lived through the Great Depression, not to mention a World War and multiple other regional wars. We know that courage and tenacity are indispensable. Although this new pandemic may have shaken us, our faith has been tested and strengthened through many losses and challenges over the decades. We have grown in empathy through the years, so that others can turn to us in their suffering and confusion. We can assist them in gaining perspective, and help them to call forth their own resilient and courageous natures to get through this period of uncertainty and anguish.
- **We are elder disciples.** We have been disciples for a long time and have walked with Jesus for many years. He has taught us what it means to

fully love our God in good times and bad. He has shown us how to love others, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Jesus has taught us how to love ourselves, including our flawed and imperfect natures. We have learned to repent and to accept God's forgiveness.

- We are not perfect disciples with perfect prayer lives, but over many years we have learned to pray, to sit silently in meditation, to enjoy the wonders of our grandchildren at play, to listen to the struggle of our teens, to reach out to our adult children without being preachy or judgmental. We have learned that life can be sacramental and to experience God's presence in nature and music. Life experience has imbued us with insight and wisdom. We have much to share and contribute to a suffering world, even while we may be suffering during this time too.

Reflection Questions

- ① What are your fears during the pandemic?
- ② What has helped you when you were faced with a frightening experience in the past?
- ③ How can your faith enable you to be a beacon for others at this time?

Facing Fears

- As elders, and so some of the more "vulnerable" people during this pandemic, the prospect of death may be more immediate to us. With it may come a greater fear of death. We may also find ourselves grieving the thought of leaving our cherished loved ones and friends. We long to see our grandchildren grow up and bring their own children into the world. We anticipate future holidays and special occasions gathered together with family and friends. We don't want this to be the end yet.
- Yet we are Easter people! We believe in life everlasting, and reunion with loved ones who went before us. Imagine the great reunions! "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard...." As I once told a young,

dying atheist in my hospice ministry, "I think you are in for a big surprise!"

- Rosa Park had her fears. She worried that someone would attack her. She understood that if she refused to go to the back of the bus, she would be arrested and thrown in jail. Rosa later wrote that once she made up her mind as to what she had to do, the fear went away. She was firmly committed and willing to suffer any consequences.
- Even if we are fearful in these times that we or a loved one may contract COVID-19, or even if we are fearful about the economic consequences of this pandemic, we can still act with courage and conviction. We can still choose to get up each day

and do what is ours to do by finding ways to serve where we are at, however we can. We may be able to sew cloth face masks for others, call a lonely friend, neighbor, or family member, donate to a charity that is struggling to meet higher needs at this time, pray for those who are particularly suffering now, etc. Finding ways to be of service can give us a respite from our worries. Acting with courage and conviction, even if we feel like we're "faking it," can keep our fears at bay.

- It is easy to see why so many are fearful of this virus. We are not sure how it got started, where it is going, or who will be struck next. Most of us are sheltering in place, but some people are ignoring public health directives to social distance. Sadly, some people who continued to gather for religious ceremonies contracted the virus and died.
- The virus is circulating, and faith does not make us immune. Data tells us that the elderly, the weak, and those with underlying health conditions are especially vulnerable. Jesus calls his followers to be especially attentive to such people—as do the public health officials. As people of faith, we should set a good example.
- In this frightening time, we are confronted with our vulnerability, and so we must remember that we are all in this together. We are invited to be intentional about “who we want to be” when there is bad news reported from every quarter. Do we want to sink into fear, despair, and helplessness,

or do we want to be Easter people who remember that our God always finds a way to bring new life out of death and light into darkness? We are invited to be like Jesus' friends and family who went through the horrific experience of his crucifixion, only to come out the other side more courageous, bold, generous, and trusting in God's care for everyone.

- We may feel that we are in a small boat in the midst of a raging storm as this virus brings tragedy to our world. Jesus' apostles knew what that was like. They were fearful. But we have a choice to focus on how high the wind and waves are or to focus on Jesus walking on the water. We can keep our eyes on the sea (the terrible news) or we can keep our eyes on Jesus. If even one person in our “boat” (be it our immediate household, our neighborhood, or our wider community) can remain calm and centered and focused on God's presence with us, it can help everyone else.
- **Be not afraid.** As Christians, we have our faith to keep us strong. We have made our decision to follow Christ wherever he leads, and divine grace gives access to whatever we need. That doesn't mean that living through this pandemic will be easy, but Jesus has promised us his peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn. 14:27).

Reflection Questions

- ① When you are gripped with worry, anxiety, or fear, what helps you to move outside of yourself?
- ② What are some concrete things you can do to be of service to others during this time?
- ③ How do you see light and new life breaking into the world in spite of the bad news?

Closing Prayer

God of peace,

You have been with us every moment of our lives,
even when we could not feel you.

Help us to know your presence with us now during
this challenging time.

When we are worried or fearful, help us to still act
with courage, conviction, and hope.

May we experience the peace that surpasses all
understanding, even in this tumultuous time,
knowing that you are always with us.

We pray this all in Christ's name.

Amen.

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Aging Gracefully during the Pandemic

Session 2: Legacy

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Ageless God,
God of the Ages,

We struggle now in an environment
that seems more fragile than ever.

Give us a breadth of vision that will enable us
to move out of this narrow space

and into greater awareness
of your presence and power.

We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.

The Gift of Time

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.

- When we made out our wills, we designated some of our treasures to different family members. But soon we discovered that the younger generation did not want our china, or silver, or mementos gathered from travel to foreign countries. So we pondered what our legacy might be to those who survived us. We reflected about gifts of time, acts of service, and wisdom passed on to the next generation.
- Then the pandemic hit.
- Some of us live alone and have been forced to “shelter in place” by ourselves. Authorities implore us to stay at home and allow adult children, friends, or caregivers to bring in food, medicine, and other necessities. We are ordering things online and encouraged to buy gift cards to help local companies and restaurants stay in business.
- Some of us are in nursing homes where each staff person is gowned and masked and subjected to a temperature check at the start of each shift.

Food is brought to our rooms and we don't enjoy the camaraderie of meals together, community games, or entertainment. We cannot receive visitors now. So what can be our contribution at this time?

- Many churches and community organizations are checking in to see how members are coping and what might be needed. We might offer to make calls, write letters, or handle small tasks. “Checking in” has become a prominent ministry, and now we may have the opportunity to be on the front lines. How many people do we know who would appreciate a call?
- Many people are re-connecting with neighbors and relatives they have not talked to in years. Others are writing notes, playing online bingo or card games with grandchildren who are bored, or reading a book and then discussing it by way of a Zoom connection on the Internet.

- **The gift of technology.** One woman lamented that her walks with her troubled granddaughter had been canceled due to the COVID-19 threat. Previously she had disliked social media, but she discovered that FaceTime began to work very well so long as it occurred after ten at night. She made the sacrifice, because she knew her affirmation and appreciation for this wayward teen were vitally important, especially now. Computers, iPhones and tablets are offering us new opportunities to connect. We just may have to endure a bit of tutoring if operating these new-fangled inventions appears daunting. Every day we can find

creative ways to communicate assurance of love and prayers to those in need of comfort, feedback, or direction.

- And let us not forget our prayer. Loneliness can be channeled into solitude if we let our friends know that we are mentioning them by name as we ask God for healing and hope for so many suffering people. Prayer is so powerful and as we draw closer to a loving God, we can be traveling along the road with those who have special needs and rely on our care and concern.

Reflection Questions

- ① What gifts of service, companionship, or prayer are you able to offer to others as you shelter in place?
- ② What has prayer been like for you during this time of sheltering in place?

New Opportunities

- Many elders are frustrated that their multiple volunteer activities have been halted or they have been implored to stay at home because of their age or more vulnerable health. Time spent making weekly St. Vincent de Paul visits, delivering Meals-on-Wheels, caring for grandchildren, or performing numerous functions at schools, nursing homes, or symphony halls has all been curtailed or canceled. We have time on our hands and yet we still have the energy and capability to do so much.
- Once the initial grieving and restlessness passes, seniors are finding ways to staff parish hot lines for neighbors seeking assistance, organize volunteers who are ready and willing to do some of the tasks they had recently performed, etc. So many people at home are cleaning closets, shredding old files, and simplifying their households so that needs and wants can be held in clearer relief. Some are journaling, and many are sharing messages of hope and humor with friends and relatives.
- These are our wisdom years when we have distilled the hard knocks and learnings of countless life experiences. Successes, failures, relationships, disappointments, and deaths can be seen now with the eagle's view of insight and meaning.
- This is a time to invite deeper listening, to gather memories, and mine the wisdom from life lessons. We can do that through thoughtful questions that encourage others to share their stories. As we deepen connections with loved ones, we can also practice being vulnerable and courageous in sharing what is most important to us.
- Perhaps there is an invitation in this time to read the writings or biographies of heroes like Gandhi, Dorothy Stang, Martin Luther King, Jr., St. Mother Theresa, or Archbishop Romero. Many novels offer wisdom as well, and poets can connect us to nature and human insight in a manner that is uplifting. We have so much time on our hands now. Will we waste it, or will we use it for further growth? Mary Oliver, in her poem "The Summer Day" asks: "What will you do with your

one wild and precious life?” What do you want to do with this time?

- Self-pity and ruminating over worst case scenarios can be replaced by calm reflection; judgment replaced by re-framing to notice more sides to the situation. We are not so ready to criticize a teen’s outlandish piercings or styles, but see the young person struggling to emerge into a coherent self. We observe the horrors of world events from a history that has seen wars and mayhem pass into new eras of change.

- In our younger years, many of us were aware that some “old people” possessed a joy and peacefulness, but that others seemed bitter and grouchy most of the time. Sweet and sour. When this pandemic period is over, our children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends will remember how we spent our senior years. Perhaps most of all they may recall how we weathered the time we were forced to shelter in our homes, at a distance from those we loved.

Reflection Questions

- ① In what ways are you being invited to grow, deepen, and learn during this time?

- ② How do you think family and friends who must stay at a distance now perceive you—as sweet or sour?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Jesus, your legacy to us grows clearer
as we grow older
and understand the wisdom you shared.

Help us to reflect your compassionate and listening
presence to others,
even when we can’t be with them physically.

Inspire us for ways we can continue to serve you
during this time of social distancing.

Amen.

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